Gladstone Institutes
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Gary S. May, Chancellor
My Diversity Story: Strengthening Innovation and Social Outcomes
It could have been me

By Gary S. May

I may work in the halls of academia, but I still live in the real world. All too frequently, I’m reminded of that fact. The barrage is constant. Birding while black, shopping while black, cooking outdoors while black, exercising while black. It is just exhausting. And I’m tired.

George Floyd could have been any African American man, including me. At a traffic stop, no one knows I am a chancellor. No one knows I have a doctorate.

“I can’t breathe.” These were the last words uttered by Eric Garner as he was being murdered on Staten Island in 2014.

“I can’t breathe.” These were among the last words spoken by George Floyd as he suffered the same fate under hauntingly similar circumstances in Minneapolis on Memorial Day.

In 2014, I tried to explain the Garner incident to my two daughters. Last week, I tried to explain the Floyd incident to myself. In both cases, I fell short. Murder captured on video defies explanation. I can’t claim to speak for all African Americans or all people of color. And to ask me or others like me to do so is a burden no one should have to carry.

However, as chancellor of a top public university with nearly 40,000 students, people look to me to weigh in on important issues. Indeed, they often expect it. Perhaps it’s to help make sense of things, like I sometimes struggle to do for myself.

As a lifelong educator and an African American whose parents endured the legacy of segregation personally, I’ve taken much of my career working to promote diversity on college campuses and in the workforce.

Not about how America has made much progress as we often think. Some of this week have only served to build an inclusive.

I’m talking about the full array of nationalities, the full spectrum of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, along with the wide variety of political views and gender identities — and a rich diversity of talents and skill sets. This is not a how to political correctness. As an engineer and leader in higher education, I’m convinced that the more diverse the mix, the more likely we are to make discoveries and solve problems.

Voice-recognition systems did not respond to female voices until we had women on design teams. Even now, research shows that facial-recognition algorithms don’t work as effectively with people who have darker skin like me.

These are practical examples of how diversity can lead to better outcomes. But diversity — like social justice — doesn’t come easy.

It requires collective effort. It requires each one of us, in our own way, working to make a difference, whether that’s through video recording, peaceful protest or working to change procedures that reflect bias.

Diversity — like social justice — is everybody’s job. Each of us must do what we can — whether we are — to eliminate racism, sexism and other negative influences on our progression as a nation.

Perhaps then we can create a way forward. Perhaps then we can realize the opportunities afforded by an equitable and inclusive society. Perhaps then our children and grandchildren might know an America, where every person can walk down the street or sit in a coffee shop or a park without fear.

Perhaps then we can breathe.
In the beginning . . .
The May family: St. Louis in the late 1970’s
MR. GARY STEPHEN MAY
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MY HEARTFELT CONGRATULATIONS TO YOU ON YOUR SELECTION AS A 1981 PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLAR.

THE COMMISSION ON PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARS HAS DETERMINED THAT YOU HAVE MADE OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENTS AND ARE RECOGNIZING YOU AS REPRESENTING THE FINEST QUALITIES IN AMERICAN EDUCATION. YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO ATTEND THE WASHINGTON D.C. PROGRAM GIVEN IN YOUR HONOR ON JUNE 9, 10, AND 11, 1981 TO CELEBRATE YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENT AS A 1981 PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLAR. YOU WILL BE RECEIVING DETAILED INFORMATION SHORTLY.

RONALD REAGAN
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Rising Above Our History
A Key Role Model: Dr. Augustine Esogbue
“You can’t be what you don’t see. I didn’t think about being a doctor. I didn’t even think about being a clerk in a store; I’d never seen a black clerk in a clothing store.”

– Dr. Jocelyn Elders,
Former U.S Surgeon General
NSBE: Building Community With My Peers
SURE: Bringing Diversity to Graduate Studies
A Great Honor: 2015 Mentoring Award
UC Davis: The Next Level of Leadership
Why We Need Diversity in STEM
Racial Bias in AI?
Diversity Leads to Better Outcomes
Questions?